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OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Summary of issues before the Economic and Social Council at the operational activities segment

Note by the Secretariat

I. BACKGROUND

1. As this is the first time that the Council will hold the operational activities segment on the basis of General Assembly resolution 48/162, the Secretariat wishes to bring to its attention a few common issues in the area of operational activities within the United Nations system. The Secretariat was guided by resolution 48/162, annex I, paragraph 29, in which the Assembly decided that each Executive Board (UNDP/UNFPA, UNICEF and eventually WFP) should submit an annual report to the Council at it substantive session, which would include a section which followed a common structure on the basis of specific areas designated by the Council or the Assembly.

2. During this period of transition to a new, reformed structure of the intergovernmental machinery in the economic and social fields of the United Nations, neither the Assembly nor the Council was in a position to designate specific areas to the Executive Boards. It will thus be one of the important tasks of the current session of the Council to designate such areas for 1995, subject to any further consideration of relevant policy questions by the Assembly. This step would ensure a timely and agreed focus for the 1995 substantive session of the Council. In the meantime, the present note provides information to assist the Council in discharging its six functions listed in paragraph 16 of annex I to resolution 48/162, namely:

> "(a) To provide the United Nations system with cross-sectoral coordination and overall guidance on a system-wide basis, including

objectives, priorities and strategies, in the implementation of the policies formulated by the General Assembly in the field of operational activities;

"(b) To monitor the division of labour between and cooperation within the bodies of the United Nations system, in particular the development funds and programmes, to include the conduct of field-level coordination, and make appropriate recommendations to the Assembly, as well to provide guidance, where appropriate, to the system;

"(c) To review and evaluate the reports on the work of the development funds and programmes, including the assessment of their overall impact, with a view to enhancing the operational activities of the United Nations on a system-wide basis;

"(d) To undertake preparatory work for the triennial policy review of operational activities by the Assembly;

"(e) To review the operationally relevant recommendations of the subsidiary bodies of the Council and other relevant bodies in the light of policies established by the Assembly, in order to incorporate them, as appropriate, into the operational activities of the United Nations;

"(f) To provide orientation and recommendations to the relevant inter-agency coordination mechanisms and to support and enhance their role."

3. In approaching this task, the Secretariat is fully aware that it is ultimately for Member States to select the thematic focus of the Council and its subsidiary bodies. This note, therefore, has the limited aim of providing an overview of some of the principal, common issues in operational activities for development, which have arisen as a result of decisions by the Assembly, the Council and Executive Boards and which could provide a focus to the work of the current session.

II. GENERAL ASSEMBLY

4. The overall policy framework for improving the quality and impact of operational activities, with specific reference to means and delivery systems, is provided by General Assembly resolution 47/199, resulting from the latest comprehensive triennial policy review of 1992. The 1993 substantive session of the Council undertook a monitoring review of progress made on the basis of a report by the Secretary-General (E/1993/73), and adopted resolution 1993/7. Again this year, the Council has before it a full progress report by the Secretary-General (E/1994/64) on all provisions of Assembly resolution 47/199. A number of the topics in this area were also considered by the Executive Boards as indicated in section IV of this note.

5. The Council may wish to consider the principal subjects arising from resolutions 47/199 and 1993/7 such as the country strategy note, resident coordinator system, programme approach, national execution, evaluation and

resource issues in the context of informal exchanges, including question and answer sessions with senior officials of the United Nations system to deepen a common understanding of current concerns and to define the parameters of the assessment required for the 1995 triennial comprehensive policy review. This informal approach was tried successfully last year.

III. AGENDA FOR DEVELOPMENT

6. An issue of considerable importance to operational activities is the current consideration by the Council and the Assembly of the "Agenda for Development". In this connection, the report (A/48/935) prepared by the Secretary-General at the request of the General Assembly defines itself as "a first contribution to the search for a revitalized vision of development" (ibid., para. 242). It describes peace, the economy, the environment, social justice and democracy as the main dimensions of development, identifies the main actors in the development process, summarizes the United Nations role in development to date, and makes the case that in the face of unprecedented global change which "seem beyond the capacity of traditional forms of international management" (ibid., para. 239), the United Nations must find ways to become a key instrument for "managing the world situation with a reasonable expectation of success" (ibid., para. 240).

7. The report stresses the need for maximizing international development resources and achieving greater consistency and coordination among international development actors. In this context, the country strategy note is cited as an important new vehicle for strengthened coordination, while the resident coordinator system is identified as a valuable mechanism for ensuring that the extensive operational capacities of the United Nations reinforce each other at the country level, are totally supportive of national objectives and fully utilized to build national capacity (see A/48/935, paras. 221-222).

8. The specific conclusions and recommendations of the Secretary-General on an agenda for development will be presented during the forty-ninth session of the General Assembly, taking into account the debate at the current session of the Council and the views expressed during the world hearings on development organized by the President of the General Assembly.

IV. EXECUTIVE BOARDS

9. The newly established Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA and UNICEF met in the first half of 1994 in regular and annual sessions.

A. United Nations Development Programme

10. Based on the Administrator's report "Initiatives for Change" (DP/1994/39), the Executive Board agreed in its decision 94/14 (see E/1994/35, Part III) that the mission of UNDP should be to assist programme countries in their endeavour to realize sustainable human development, in line with their national development programmes and priorities. The Board emphasized that national

development priorities should be the primary determinant of UNDP-supported programmes. In this context, the Administrator was encouraged to continue his efforts to focus UNDP's programmes by operationalizing elements identified in his report and to report back to the Board at its 1995 annual session on progress made.

11. At its annual session in June, the Executive Board of UNDP/UNFPA, in the context of the consideration of the subject of the Office for Project Services, took note of the Secretary-General's intention to strengthen the coordinating and central funding roles of UNDP in accordance with General Assembly resolution 47/199 (see E/1994/35, Part III, decision 94/12. It recommended to the General Assembly that, instead of the merger proposed in Governing Council decision 93/42 of 18 June 1993, that Office should become a separate and identifiable entity in a form that does not create a new agency and in partnership with UNDP and other operational entities. Its administrative support, including that relating to financial and personal matters, will continue to be provided by UNDP and at the country level it will continue to work through the UNDP field network. In relation to South Africa, the Executive Board, in decision 94/11, approved a $10 million IPF allocation for the remainder of the fifth programming cycle.

12. In decision 94/16, on the mid-term review of the fifth programming cycle, the Executive Board approved revised indicative planning figures (IPFs) at 70 per cent of originally established levels and encouraged the Administrator to find resources to restore IPFs. Regarding the sixth programming cycle (decision 94/17), the Board reaffirmed the principles of eligibility of all recipient countries, and, inter alia, requested the Administrator to outline a possible structure of further deliberations addressing in particular the following points: the development of the Administrator's "Initiatives for Change", options for the revision of the IPF programming framework and of the resource distribution methodology, including eligibility criteria and graduation, and supplementary criteria and weights.

13. At its second regular session in May (for the report, see E/1994/35 (Part II)), the Executive Board dealt with a number of sectoral issues requiring system-wide coordination. For example, reports were reviewed on assistance to the Palestinian people, the role of UNDP in humanitarian affairs and the proposed joint and co-sponsored United Nations programme on HIV/AIDS. The Administrator was authorized to recruit 22 National Officers who will work in the HIV/AIDS programme (decision 94/6). In addition, a number of country programmes were approved. In recognition of Albania's current and near-term circumstances, the Administrator was authorized to allocate an additional $1.6 million to its fifth cycle IPF resources on an exceptional and one-time basis.

14. With regard to evaluation, the Board was informed about UNDP involvement in the United Nations system harmonization of monitoring and evaluation, about a new feedback strategy in UNDP, including a system of programme performance audit, and that the UNDP evaluation function would henceforth be linked to strategic planning so it would contribute directly to policy formation and management decision (see E/1994/35 (Part II), sect. VI). The Board considered that, pursuant to resolution 47/199, the next triennial comprehensive policy

review of operational activities of the United Nations system, the Council should give special attention to the ways and means for United Nations organs and agencies to implement joint, cost-effective and action-oriented evaluation mechanisms and relevant actions that need to be taken by the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ibid., para. 142).

B. United Nations Population Fund

15. The UNFPA segment of the UNDP/UNFPA Executive Board took place at the annual session of the Executive Board, held from 13 to 16 June. It took note of several reports and adopted decisions on several agenda items. For example, it considered the annual report of the Executive Director; the update of the UNFPA Review and Assessment Exercise; a periodic report on project and thematic evaluation, programme review and strategy development, including feedback and use of evaluation results; work plan for 1995-1998 including programming expenditure authority; Global Initiative on Contraception Requirements and Logistics Management Needs in Developing Countries in the 1990s; and country programme approvals for Chad, Zambia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Maldives, the Philippines and Nicaragua.

16. In decision 94/22, the Board decided to support the participation of UNFPA in the new United Nations joint and co-sponsored programme on HIV/AIDS. Moreover, in decision 94/23 on the question of implementation of Assembly resolution 47/199, the Board requested the Administrator of UNDP and the Executive Director of UNFPA to incorporate feedback from their field offices, including on problems encountered, in their reports on the implementation of this resolution. The Board also adopted decision 94/21 recommending that the General Assembly commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of UNFPA in 1994.

C. United Nations Children's Fund

17. At the annual session of the Executive Board of UNICEF (see E/1994/34, Part III) decisions were adopted on the 1994-1997 medium-term plan, the follow-up to the World Summit for Children, ensuring child survival, protection and development in Africa, gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, emergency operations, land-mines, the situation of children in Rwanda and follow-up to the multi-donor evaluation (the latter covering UNICEF overall programme objectives and strategies; inter-agency coordination and collaboration - stressing the importance it attaches to the mechanisms for coordination at the field level established in resolution 47/199 and also stressing the importance of focusing collaborative efforts on policy and programme coordination and technical dialogue - and UNICEF accountability, including by stressing the relevance of resolution 47/199 and ongoing efforts by UNICEF aimed at improving accountability), the greeting card and related operations work plan, the budgeted income for the 1994 season and rules of procedure. In the context of emergency operations, the question of the proportion of emergency funding, which also contributes to meeting UNICEF development objectives, was raised for further consideration in early 1995.

18. The Executive Board also held informal consultations on issues that might be suggested for discussion at the Council. While no conclusions were reached on this question, and it was understood that the Council would make its own determination in this respect, among the subjects mentioned were the implementation of strategies that could emerge from upcoming international conferences, as well as the Plan of Action of the World Summit for Children, Agenda 21 and the Commonwealth of Independent States. With regard to the "20/20" concept, which entails targeting 20 per cent of ODA and 20 per cent of national budgetary allocations to basic human development needs, the Board in its decision 1994/A/2 invited the Council to discuss this concept thoroughly, stressing in particular poverty eradication within the context of sustainable development.

19. At the regular sessions of the UNICEF Executive Board (see E/1994/34, Parts I and II), decisions were taken to implement General Assembly resolution 48/162 on further measures for restructuring and revitalizing the United Nations in the economic and social fields, including future working methods of the Executive Board.

20. Among other issues dealt with at these sessions, the UNICEF secretariat was encouraged to continue to participate actively in the ongoing negotiations among the secretariats of UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, WHO and the World Bank to establish with urgency a United Nations joint and co-sponsored programme on HIV/AIDS and was requested to transmit the decision on this issue to the Council (see E/1994/34 (Part II), decision 1994/R.2/13). Decisions were also taken on the report of the special session of the UNICEF/WHO Joint Committee on Health Policy, the report of the fourth meeting of the UNESCO/UNICEF Joint Committee on Education, proposals for UNICEF cooperation and programme reviews, assistance to Palestinian children and women, the country programme consideration and approval process and UNICEF policy for Central and Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltic States.

D. World Food Programme

21. At the thirty-seventh session of the Committee on Food Aid Policies and Programmes (CFA) of the World Food Programme (WFP), held in Rome from 19 to 27 May 1994 (see E/1994/84), CFA established an open-ended working group in order to proceed with the implementation of General Assembly resolution 48/162. The group will also examine the legislative changes necessary to enable WFP to move towards a programme approach, consistent with Assembly resolution 47/199, and will report to CFA at its thirty-eighth session in 1994. CFA will address the question of synchronization of pledging and budget periods at a later stage. CFA also considered criteria for project approval and called for drawing technical assistance from a broad spectrum of sources to assist in the planning, design and evaluation of projects, and to review support arrangements with FAO and other United Nations agencies.

22. Further issues that were considered involved improved coordination at the field level in humanitarian assistance, enhancing financial accountability and the full integration of food aid into development plans and priorities of recipient countries. CFA initiated a review of the future orientation of WFP,

beginning an important policy debate, which included the need to move to a country-based programme approach, in line with Assembly resolution 47/199. It was decided that a revised mission statement was required for WFP and that more detailed proposals on the implications of the programme approach should be prepared for discussion at its next session. CFA noted that this approach would not only ensure that WFP is a better partner for recipients, but also with the organizations of the United Nations system, particularly as no single institution has the experience, knowledge and understanding to deal with all of the issues of poverty and underdevelopment. It would thus elevate the level of collaboration, encourage practical division of labour, and enable a collective effort to help the hungry and poor more effectively. In addition, many delegations emphasized the multilateral character of WFP, the need for upfront, untied contributions, and for broadening the donor base.

V. SUMMARY

23. The operational activities segment of the Council, composed as it is now of a high-level and a working level section, needs to perform at least two central tasks. One is to provide guidance and coordination on policies emanating from the General Assembly; the other involves the review and monitoring of the funds and programmes. In these and other functions, the Council is likely to focus both on the ends and objectives of operational activities as well as resources and delivery systems. Experience has shown that in order to maximize the participation of high-level officials there is an advantage to a focused discussion around one or two central themes. At its organizational session for 1994, at which the Council did not yet have the results of the Executive Board meetings, nor the report on the Agenda for Development, the Council did not retain a thematic focus.

24. In the meantime, several themes have emerged from the Executive Boards which might help focus the high-level section this year. From the Executive Board of UNDP arises the question of operationalizing the concept of sustainable human development. Continued consideration is being planned for next year's annual session of the Board and the Council may wish to provide some guidance in this respect.

25. The Executive Board of UNICEF specifically called for the consideration of the "20/20" proposal as elaborated in paragraph 18 above. Its consideration might also be an important contribution to the upcoming World Summit on Social Development. There are clearly important operational implications in the context of the multi-disciplinary nature of most social sectors, and thus the importance of achieving effective harmonization of approaches and methods of operations within the United Nations system.

26. The serious set-backs in resources in 1993, which were part of the consultations on funding of operational activities in a resumed forty-eighth session of the General Assembly, need also to be addressed by the Council, possibly in connection with the preparation for next year's triennial comprehensive policy review.

27. In addition, while it is too early to address the Agenda for Development in operational terms, there are none the less questions about the practical implications of the outcome of the high-level segment of the Council on the Secretary-General's report, and the results of the world hearings on the matter, which need to be considered.

28. Furthermore, the Council's 1993 operational activities segment also showed that the specific areas of action in operational activities, which can be described as "delivery systems" (the country strategy note, programme approach, national execution, rules and procedures, and even the field system and resident coordinator system), can best be monitored by the Council through informal question and answer sessions, supplemented with any additional data and information the Council may wish to consider before reaching conclusions and decisions. In relation to these specific issues arising from the implementation of Assembly resolution 47/199, as presented in the Secretary-General's progress report (E/1994/64) including action taken by Executive Heads and other governing bodies, the Council may want to consider consecutively each major subject (the country strategy note, programme approach, national execution, the resident coordinator system, monitoring, evaluation and audit, harmonization of policies and procedures) through the informal format described in paragraph 5 above, ensuring the full participation of the concerned organizations of the United Nations system, particularly the funds and programmes of the United Nations.

29. As mentioned earlier, an important task of the Council will be to provide guidance on the common structure of the annual reports of the Executive Boards for the 1995 session of the Council. In approaching this task, and all other matters being referred for action over the next year, the Council may wish to bear in mind the parameters to be established for an effective comprehensive policy review by the General Assembly in 1995. In this connection, it is hoped that the framework of the review might be expanded beyond Assembly resolution 47/199, by responding to new emerging requirements of developing countries, particularly in regions facing especially serious and new problems. Moreover, some issues on which no further policy action is required at the level of the Assembly might not require in-depth consideration next year, thus providing the opportunity to focus on a few, critical matters. It is hoped that the relationship of global mandates and the needs of individual developing countries - as expressed in their plans and priorities - can be brought out in next year's review.